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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES AGREE ON ALLOCATION OF AIRTIME FOR
ELECTIONS

Reftel: Addis Ababa 3010

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Sixty-five Ethiopian political parties have reached agreement on how to allocate airtime and print space of state media for electoral campaigning. Three of these parties tabled proposals during three days of negotiation and one suggested by the nominally opposition Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) was finally adopted. Available airtime and print space will be allocated by a weighted formula that takes into account the number of seats a party has in the parliament and the number of candidates a party fields, with a final media tranche divided equally among Ethiopia's 96 registered political parties. Although some opposition groups argue the agreement unfairly benefits the ruling party, most parties participating in the negotiations pronounce the agreement to be a good compromise. END SUMMARY.

Negotiations

12. (U) Two negotiators from each of the four major political parties - Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP), Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP)- and four negotiators selected at large from 61 smaller political parties reached agreement on how to allocate airtime and print space on state-owned electronic and print media. The negotiators struck a deal on January 1 after three days of intense negotiations. The Forum for Justice and Democratic Dialogue (Forum) and 23 smaller political parties did not participate in the negotiations.

Three Options Tabled for Negotiations

13. (U) The formula proposed by the government-run Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority and accepted by EPRDF and CUDP (together comprising 401 of the 547 seats in the present parliament) suggested that 60 percent of available media time and space be allocated according to the number of seats a party had in the parliament, 30 percent for the number of candidates a party fielded for the upcoming election, and 10 percent divided equally for all 96 political parties registered to compete in the election. AEUP did not agree, arguing that EPRDF would have an unfair advantage as it has 367 seats in the present parliament and, as the incumbent ruling party, had the ability to field candidates for each of the 547 available seats. AEUP instead suggested 30 percent for parliamentary seats, 10 percent for the candidates a party fielded and 60 percent for all political parties.

EDP Seals the Deal

¶4. (U) The proposal suggested by Lidetu Ayalew, Chairman of the EDP was accepted by all negotiators. (NOTE. EDP is nominally an opposition party but in reality generally follows the EPRDF lead. END NOTE.) The accepted proposal will provide 55 percent of airtime based the number of seats a party has in the parliament, 20 percent for the number of candidates a party is able to field and 25 percent for all political parties.

EPRDF to Have the Lion's Share

¶5. (U) The number of seats each party has in the parliament is a controversial issue because of the split within parties and changing alliances following the 2005 elections. According to the Secretariat of the Parliament, political parties and coalitions have the following seats: EPRDF 367, Forum 60, EDP 43, CUDP 34, EPRDF affiliates 42, and independent 1.

Non-EPRDF Negotiators Optimistic

¶6. (SBU) According to Lidetu Ayalew of EDP, the fact that political parties with different views were able to reach an agreement in and of itself is a positive development. He said he was happy with the agreement, and added that it is not the amount of airtime and print space that is important, but how well a party uses both. Lidetu said he plans to use EDP's allocation to address millions of voters and explain the party's platform. Yaikob Likke of AEUP said the agreement was not perfect and that it favored the EPRDF but that it was nevertheless a good compromise.

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The Forum did not participate in any of the negotiated agreements reached by political parties. Merera Gudina, Chairman of FJDD, dismissed the agreement as a pre-arranged "EPRDF ploy." While he didn't agree with the allocation, he said he would make good use of what he was allocated to educate the public about the Forum's platform.

Parties Have Yet to Agree on
Modalities of Public Debate

¶7. (U) According to the electoral schedule published by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), political parties will campaign from February 9 to May 20. Party negotiators have not yet agreed on the modalities of the public debates. EPRDF is not comfortable with unscripted, unedited live transmissions. Non-EPRDF negotiators are insisting on live transmissions of every public debate and say the recently signed election code of conduct (Reftel) is available to address the concerns of EPRDF.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite the fact that opposition political parties in Ethiopia are fragmented and weak, negotiated agreements with the ruling party on an election code of conduct and the allocation of airtime are steps in the right direction. In a country like Ethiopia where the illiteracy rate is high (the GOE admits to 60 percent, most experts estimate more than 70 percent), the best medium to reach the electorate is the electronic media (radio and television). Opposition political parties will now be able to reach millions of voters. Whether the government allows full access to the airtime and how the parties make use of it remain to be seen. END COMMENT.

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